FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH
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Psalm 84
Ephesians 6:10–20

"Be strong in the Lord. . . .
Put on the whole armor of God."
Ephesians 6:10-11 (NRSV)

The cross is a reminder of Jesus' willingness to risk everything for the love of God's little ones.
The cross he died on reminds me that his Way is not the way of violence against his enemies
or victory over those who do not believe in him, but the way of self-annihilating love
for God and neighbor. I cannot make any more sense out of "triumphant Christians"
than I can out of "conquering servants" or "warrior babies."

Barbara Brown Taylor
Leaving Church

I used to love that passage of Scripture: fasten your belt, put on your breastplate, take your shield, put your helmet on, pick up your sword, "the whole armor of God." I loved it. I loved the old hymn:

Onward, Christian soldiers,
Marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus,
Going on before.
Christ the royal master
Leads against the foe.
Forward into battle,
See his banners go.
Onward, Christian soldiers,
Marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus
Going on before.

At daily Vacation Bible School, that wonderful invention by which parents used to be able to get the kids out of the house for two whole weeks during summertime—I hasten to add that I do not mean our daily Vacation Bible School, organized and led by Donna Gray, which is a very successful program of education and nurture, service and fun for our children; I mean the old model, the military model—we used to march from Bible classes to an assembly, singing "Onward, Christian Soldiers, Marching as to War."

And then the Bible lesson for the assembly was, frequently it seemed to me, based on Ephesians 6, and there was a colorful flannel-graph of a boy and girl, putting on their armor to go out and do battle with the forces of evil, which I had no trouble identifying with the kids on the next block with whom I had issues.

Distinguished New Testament scholar Beverly Gaventa, Professor at Princeton Seminary, has written a commentary on this passage. She begins: "One may be somewhat put off by all the military imagery," the allusions to violence and war. I know Professor Gaventa. She is a fine scholar and teacher. She is also gentle. I think her beginning observation, however, is wrong. Some aren't put off at all by the military and violent images. Some absolutely love it. Some love the notion of religion as a kind of warfare.

"Put on the whole armor of God," Paul wrote. I've always been fascinated by armor. When you visit the Art Institute and walk toward Regenstein Hall, the special exhibit area, or the Garden Restaurant, you have to walk through the Armor Exhibit, which, interestingly, is beside an exhibit of medieval ecclesiastical garb. In any event, you can see real helmets, breastplates, chain mail, heavy shields, spears, and swords. And if you do just a little reading, you will discover that a man who put all of that on couldn't move much; that for jousting, for instance, an armor-clad knight had to be hoisted onto his horse. Armor had its functions, but also its limitations. It actually wasn't much good for fighting.

"Put on the whole armor of God," Paul wrote to the early Christian church in Ephesus during the last half of the first century. The people of Ephesus would have been used to seeing the helmets, breastplates, shields, and swords of the Roman Legionnaires patrolling the streets of the city, marching through to demonstrate authority and to keep public order. The passage also reflects a tiny church's struggle to survive in an environment that was largely indifferent but which, at a moment's notice, could become hostile. Paul thought that the church, representing the truth of the gospel, was in a war with hostile, cosmic forces, "spiritual forces of evil," forces opposed to the reign of God. And his advice was to take it seriously and to do battle with an arsenal, an alternate arsenal. We miss this part mostly. The alternate arsenal is truth, righteousness, peace, faith, the word of God.

The belt he urged them to put around their waist was truth; the breastplate, righteousness. It is a skillful and eloquent exercise in metaphor.

The fact is, however, that the Christian church has all too often eagerly become allied with actual military power. It began in 312, during a war between two Roman generals, each of whom claimed to be the emperor: Constantine, son of the emperor who had died, and Maxentius, son of the former emperor's predecessor. Constantine's army was encamped at the Milvian Bridge, on the outskirts of Rome. On the evening of October 27, as the armies prepared for battle, Constantine had a vision: the cross and the words "In this sign conquer." He ordered his troops to paint the cross on their shields and, of course, the next day, they prevailed, capturing and killing thousands of Maxentius's troops. Until that time, Christianity had been an underground movement, an outlaw sect, worshiping in secret, frequently persecuted by the state. After the Battle of Milvian Bridge, the new emperor, Constantine, ended the persecution and ruled that it was no longer illegal to be a Christian and follow Jesus. He was baptized on his deathbed, and his successor, Theodosius, made Christianity the official religion of the empire. The cross became the official logo on Roman shields. And it wasn't long before victorious Roman legions were marching defeated Barbarian tribes into the closest river for Christian baptism. Some historians think that it was the worst thing that could have happened to Christianity.

Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall traces the long tension within the church between those who lived by the Constantinian model, cross on the shields, church ultimately acting like a real nation state with real power, financial and military, and those who believed the church's task is to live the values of Jesus, which are often in conflict with the policies of the empire. Historians point to the Crusades as an example of the tragedy of Constantinian Christianity. Thousands and thousands of Christian soldiers traveled from Britain, France, and Germany to the Holy Land to do battle against its Muslim occupiers. The Crusades failed mostly, thousands were killed, thousands died of the plague. During the Fourth Crusade, frustrated, angry Crusader armies turned on the Christian capital of Constantinople, the seat of the Eastern church, and briefly prevailed, an event that deepened the divide between Western Roman Christianity and Eastern Orthodox Christianity and which continues today.

All of that dismal history, by the way, is why we need to be exceedingly careful when we talk about what our nation is currently attempting in Iraq and the Middle East. "Crusade" language is not helpful. This is not a war between religions. A war against "Islamic Fascism" moves the struggle into the arena of religion and culture war in a way that is misleading and dangerous and tragic.

Christian pacifists look at scripture, the words and life of Jesus, and our sad history and conclude that Christianity is essentially pacifist and that followers of Jesus cannot engage in violence of any kind. Down through the centuries they have made a brave and important witness. Others, defined as Christian realists, the late Reinhold Niebuhr for instance, believe that it is sometimes necessary to take up arms, to defend one's self, one's family and nation and values, and that there is no conflict between Christianity and a strong military capacity. But Niebuhr and others add that the cross should not be on the shield and Christians who find themselves in military conflict should not only have a weapon ready but a heart aching at the tragic inability of human beings to live God's will for peace.

What's the point of the text? The phrase "From strength to strength" comes from Psalm 84, a beautiful hymn we read together. "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! . . . Happy are those whose strength is in you. . . . As they go through the valley they make it a place of springs." Strength here is revealed not in defeating the enemy, but in cultivating and nurturing life, transforming an arid, dry valley into a lush garden. Strength here is for the purpose of life and goodness and truth, mercy and peace, Paul's alternate arsenal.

I don't envy policy makers who are responsible for defending our nation from those who would attack us. I do not think that pacifism is a faithful response to people who plan to blow up airplanes. But, out of our faith tradition, I think we have to ask about the effectiveness of violent warfare as our primary response. If indeed we face insurrection against our power, authority, and values, I find myself drawn to the high-ranking American military planner who said on CNN last week that the way to defeat an insurrection is not by killing insurrectionists, which seems only to recruit more insurrectionists, but by investing resources, our hearts and minds and money, in addressing the situations in which insurrectionists thrive. Does anybody really believe that the way to defeat Hezbollah and establish peace and security for Israel is by killing Lebanese civilians?

The point is that there are strategies that do work, that violence rarely does ultimately, that ironically perhaps it is the New Testament that is ultimately realistic, and that the job of faithful people and faithful churches, not always popular, is to give voice to that alternate arsenal.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her recent book, *Leaving Church*, tells about her decision to give up her ministry as an Episcopal parish priest in order to teach, lecture, and write—which she does with great faithfulness and eloquence. As a priest, she wore daily, in addition to her clerical collar, a pectoral cross. "I liked to wear it back when a cross meant only love to me. Now I know too many people who regard it as a weapon. Some have been

cut deeply by it. . . . While those who wield it like a rapier seem to believe that their swordplay pleases God (p. 214).

Taylor asks “If Jesus meant for his followers to rule the world, then why did he teach them to wash feet?” (p. 215). The heart of Christianity is the radical, counterintuitive suggestion that the most powerful force in the world is vulnerable, sacrificial love, love that looks weak and helpless but which, finally, as St. Paul promised, “still stands when all else has fallen”; God’s love, expressed most eloquently in that symbol of vulnerability and weakness—the cross of Jesus Christ. From that love, Paul wrote, nothing in all of creation can separate us, not even death.

When the government of South Africa cancelled a political rally against apartheid, Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu moved the rally into St. George’s Cathedral and turned it into a worship service. Soldiers and riot police followed and lined the walls of the cathedral with weapons and bayonets drawn. Tutu spoke about the evils of apartheid and how rulers who supported it were doomed to fail. Tutu is a small man physically but not spiritually. He pointed a frail finger at the soldiers and police—“You may be powerful, but you are not God. God cannot be mocked. You have already lost.”

It was a moment of unbelievable tension. Tutu came out from behind his pulpit and flashed his radiant smile. “Therefore, since you have already lost, we are inviting you to join the winning side.”

The crowd roared. The police and solders put their weapons away and left the cathedral (a Jim Wallis story quoted by John Ortberg in *Living by the Word*, p. 121).

And a personal anecdote. On behalf of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), we were visiting a peace and justice center in Buenos Aires ten years ago, and while there we had a privileged meeting with a group of Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. During the Argentine military dictatorship, 1976 to 1983, something like 30,000 Argentine citizens, many of them young people, were taken from their homes at night, arrested, interrogated, tortured, and never heard from again—“the Disappeared.” For thirty years, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo have met in the square in central Buenos Aires to walk, in silence and great dignity, each wearing a white head scarf in the form of a baby diaper, symbolizing their lost children. The civilian government continues to investigate, has admitted that many of the victims were murdered. Nine thousand are still not accounted for. The Mothers continue their weekly vigil. Now some of them are Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo.

We asked them about their experiences. “My daughter, Violeta, twenty-four, a medical student, was taken from our home on June 17, 1976, and we never saw her again.” Students, physicians, lawyers, social activists, many of them young people, disappeared. The regime explained that it was at war with dangerous subversives. One woman, weeping now, told us she lost her husband, son, daughter, and son-in-law.

“How did the authorities react when you first showed up on the Plaza de Mayo?” we asked. “At first they made fun of us and called us mad,” they explained. “And then one day a truck pulled up, troops got out and surrounded us and said they would shoot us if we didn’t disperse. One of the women fell to her knees, then another, and then we all did, fell to our knees and began to pray, ‘Our Father who art in heaven. . . .’ The soldiers lowered their weapons, got back in the truck and drove away.”

Not many of us will find ourselves in that situation. But we do, every one of us, have our battles to fight. Barbara Brown Taylor says her battle is with her pride, her unwillingness to fail, which means her unwillingness to trust the central truth of the Christian gospel: “life springs from death” (p. 218).

Taylor tells about sitting beside her father, holding his hand, as he died after a long illness and how she experienced both the helplessness and weakness of love but also the power of love. “When everything we count on for protection fails, the Divine Presence does not fail. The hands are still there—not promising to rescue, not promising to intervene, promising only to hold you no matter how far you fall” (p. 218).

Most of us know what our battles are about, the small wars we wage: the daily struggle with the hurried, frantic busyness of our lives; our captivity to our possessions; slavery to success and winning at all costs. Some battle crushing poverty, and some contend with crushing affluence. Some battle addiction, real addiction. Some battle demons of self-doubt and guilt; some battle memories of broken relationships; some battle depression. And some are in a life-and-death struggle with disease, mustering the courage to get out of bed and go to the radiation lab at 7:00 a.m. and do battle another day.

We can’t, most of us can’t, choose our particular circumstances in life. But we can choose how to live, what resources to employ, which arsenal to engage.

We can choose to trust and lean on and hold as tightly as we can to the love of God in Jesus Christ, who invites us to be part of a victory he has already won.

“Onward, Christian Soldiers” isn’t in the hymnal any longer, a good thing because we’d probably sing it for the wrong reasons. I know I would. A better choice might be “Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us, Much We Need Thy Tender Care.”

You know, O God, our struggles, the battles we fight. You know our deepest needs. So we ask you for courage to fight the good fight, but also for faith to use your gifts of truth and mercy and goodness and peace. And we ask you to give us the faith to derive our strength from your strength and to trust you with our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen